Script Theory

General

Script theory was first introduced and presented by Silvan Tomkins in 1954[1] as an extension of his affect theory[2], but was further developed in late 1970s by Roger Schank[3]. Script theory is an extension of schema theory, orientated on explaining of the structure of knowledge, especially on **representation of complex event sequences**.

What is script theory?

A script is a mental construct like schema, but which consist of a **sequence of actions or events necessary to achieve a goal**. It can also include relevant people, locations or objects. There are several similar **definitions** of scripts like:

- "*a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well-understood situation*"[4],
- "*a **coherent sequence of events expected by an individual** in a particular context, involving him either as participant or as an observer*"[5], or
- "*a **mental picture plus caption** representing the action sequences, participants, and physical objects found in a situation*"[6].

This sequence of actions contained in a script is then applied in a situation also called a *scene*. As Tomkins explains,

- "*In my script theory, the scene, a happening with a perceived beginning and end, is the basic unit of analysis. The whole connected set of scenes lived in sequence is called the plot of a life. The script, in contrast, does not deal with all the scenes or the plot of a life, but rather with the individual's rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling a magnified set of scenes.*"[7]

Scripts can be defined into four different types[8]:

- **episodic** (for managing situations and events),
- **instrumental** (for using and displaying procedural knowledge),
- **personal** (for representing one's own goals and plans), and
- **definitional** (for object-recognition).

According to Schank, scripts are just like schemata, also a **memory construct**, yet he believes that **memory is** organized around one's personal experiences (**episodic**) rather than categories of meaning. Schank is therefore a proponent of learning by doing and experiential learning. New scripts are developed during lifetime and old scripts can change as the result of new experiences.

What is the practical meaning of script theory?

The most cited example for a script is Schank's[9] example of a restaurant script. When in a restaurant,

one behaves according to *restaurant script*: he finds a free place, sits, waits for the waiter to take his order and finally eats his meal. He does not have to convince the waiter and the cook to feed him every time he comes to the restaurant since they are all behaving in accordance with the restaurant schema and assigned roles. The same can be said if one reads about a situation in a restaurant. Knowing the particular script which is to be used in a situation results in less required thinking and mental activity.

Criticisms

Keywords and most important names

- **Script theory**, **script**, **memory construct**, **schema**
- Silvan Tomkins, Roger Schank

Bibliography

TIP: Script Theory (Schank). Retrieved March 15, 2011.

Erasmus, A. C, E. Bishoff, and G. G. Rousseau. The potential of using script theory in consumer behaviour research. Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences/Tydskrif vir Gesinsekologie en Verbruikerswetenskappe 30, no. 0 (2010).

Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning. Schema And Script Theory. Retrieved March 15, 2011.

Read more

Schank, R.C. & Abelson, R. Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding. Hillsdale, NJ: Earlbaum Assoc, 1977.

Schank, R.C. Reading and Understanding. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. 1982.

Schank, R.C. Explanation Patterns: Understanding Mechanically and Creatively. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986.

[1]
PsycINFO: Citation and Abstract. Script theory: Differential magnification of affects. Tomkins, Silvan S.
[2]
Read more: Wikipedia: Affect theory.
[3]
Some sources like Ellis, Donald G. From language to communication. Routledge, 1999. or TIP: Script Theory (Schank) originally assign script theory to Roger Schank.
[4]
Erasmus, A. C, E. Bishoff, and G. G. Rousseau. The potential of using script theory in consumer

behaviour research. Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences/Tydskrif vir Gesinsekologie en Verbruikerswetenskappe 30, no. 0 (2010).

5)

Puto, C. P. Memory for scripts in advertisements. Advances in Consumer Research XII:404-409. Fifteenth Annual Conference. Association for Consumer Research. 1985.

6)

Abelson R. P. Psychological status of the script concept. American Psychologist 36(7): p715 – 729. 1981.

7)

Tomkins, Silvan. Script Theory: Differential Magnification of Affects. Nebraska Symposium On Motivation 1978. Ed. Richard A. Deinstbier. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

8)

Guirguis, M. M. A script theory of intentional content. PhD thesis. 2003.

9)

Erasmus, A. C, E. Bishoff, and G. G. Rousseau. The potential of using script theory in consumer behaviour research. Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences/Tydskrif vir Gesinsekologie en Verbruikerswetenskappe 30, no. 0, 2010.